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Corpora yes, concordancing no?

I would like to raise two issues in connection with Jarek Krajka's article: (1) what to put in a curriculum and (2) how useful concordancing is in TEFL. On a practical note, diagnosing the actual computer literacy of teacher trainees is a must and the resulting average should be taken into consideration. My experience shows that the number of things trainees can actually do on a computer often falls short of expectations. If that experience is not unique, it seems necessary to practice "mouse skills" alongside teaching computer-assisted language instruction proper.

As to corpus consultation, granted that certain obstacles are overcome, it seems to have a positive contribution to make at higher level of advancement – including teacher training. However, corpora may be used in a number of ways. Referencing online resources (BNC or simply Google), for example, is very different from elaborate analysis of concordancer results. Concordancers are primarily linguistic aids, whose classroom application dates back to the time of early CALL enthusiasts, motivated by the idea of a direct look at authentic data (cf. Holmes, 1999). Today the Internet itself is a vast corpus of texts exemplifying authentic language use in contexts spanning well beyond the n-word "windows", while EFL dictionaries provide corpus-based linguistic information adapted for use by learners. Web-enhanced reading comprehension or writing tasks may offer a more efficient way to teach words, collocations, register and style. Widowson raised more general doubts (cited in Seidlhofer, 2003) that I see as supportive of this viewpoint. We must also bear in mind that there is no research directly focusing on independent corpus consultation by significant number of learners: Thomas Cobb's study was the biggest and involved a little more than 100 learners (Chambers, 2007).

CALL methodology today is merely a set of guideline books and some problems remain unresolved, such as the choice and amount of material to be taught through corpus samples. More importantly, there is a question of autonomy, which I see as a prerequisite for any curriculum that is based on self-study and the ability to reflect on “raw” material. In other words, corpora access needs changes in the broader educational context.

Bibliography

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